



Reading UA Fanthorpe with the Bloomian Lens

Fatima Noori

Assistant Professor, Jagat Taran Girls' Degree College, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India

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Abstract

Harold Bloom's thesis of the Anxiety of Influence (1973) proposed a uniquely antithetical approach to study poetry, where he advocates that all poets suffer from an 'anxiety' of being influenced by a literary parent, whom the poet then has a creative struggle with to find his own voice.

The present paper attempts a critique of U. A. Fanthorpe's ekphrastic poem 'Not My Best Side' (Side Effects 1978)- employing this premise and deciphering the revisionary ratios used by Fanthorpe on her parent poet to chalk out her own path. The study details how thematic concerns as well as poetic idiom corresponded to the changing times, even when art is supposed to be anachronistic.

Keywords: *Harold Bloom, Anxiety of Influence, poetic misprision, Tessera, Clinamen, Browning*

Fanthorpe:

Ursula Ashkam Fanthorpe is surprisingly not a popular name amongst Indian poetry readers, even when her diction and her idiom are very accessible and her themes refreshing; her poetry offers the detachment of Larkin and the subversive wit of Ezekiel, and the feminine voice remains as close to reality as possible. Born in 1929 in London, Ursula Fanthorpe is a widely read poet in the United Kingdom with an Oxford University education. She served as the head of the English department at Cheltenham Ladies College for almost a decade before giving it up to take a de-glazed position of a receptionist-clerk at a psychiatric hospital in Bristol in her forties. This was when she moved into writing poetry. Her first collection, *Side Effects*, was published in 1978; eight more volumes followed, in which she remained faithful to her first publisher, Peterloo Poets. Fanthorpe took up the position of Poet-in-Residence several times at Durham, Lancaster and Newcastle. She became the first female to be nominated for the post of Oxford Professor of Poetry in 1994, was awarded an honorary doctorate degree by the University of Gloucestershire and the University of Bath. She was also a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2001, and went on to receive the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 2003. (Brownjohn 2009)

Anna. M. Evans discusses Fanthorpe's commitment to England in her poems and observes the poet's range of interest in her collections from "England's geography, wildlife, quirks and flaws.... to archaeological finds and disappeared past landscapes." She quotes Elizabeth Sandie's observations as well:

"All sorts of closely observed detail of everyday lives creep unobtrusively into her work: details of language use, fashion, routines and habits,

predominant concerns, social predicaments, which provide a record of history in the making." (67).

Bloom:

Harold Bloom's thesis on the *Anxiety of Influence* (1973) approaches the text as a Freudian revision of the poet's Oedipal complex, ushering a shift in the course of literary analysis and criticism. For Bloom, all poets struggle with the influence of poets of the past. Those who appear to be under a heavier influence and are unable to create a distinct identity are referred to as weak poets. However, poets who have struggled against a literary parent or a predecessor to carve out their own voices are termed as strong poets. The strong poet has originality and contributes a novelty to the field of poetry.

The basic tenet of *Anxiety* is that all poetry proceeds by "misreading" previous poetry, and that, especially since Milton, all Western poetry has been struggling to create a space for itself where no space exists, because all has been said. Therefore, poets lie to themselves, "misreading" the precursor so as to convince themselves that the precursor left something out, or failed to go far enough, or got something wrong. So modern poetry is a "poetry of exhaustion", and "poetry will be self-slain, murdered by its own past strength" (*Anxiety* 10). Poets themselves might deny that what they are doing is misreading the precursor, but Bloom (channelling Freud) sees this as a defence mechanism - the anxiety manifests itself as a denial of anxiety. (Wallace 2012)

This strong position may be achieved by the poet through a struggle against the influencer poet by employing a revision/reassessment approach termed 'revisionary ratios' by Bloom. They are six in number according to Bloom's classification: *Clinamen* (Poetic Misprision), *Tessera* (Completion and Antithesis), *Kenosis* (Discontinuity), *Daemonization* (Counter-Sublime), *Apophrades* (Return of the Dead), and *Askesis* (Purgation). (Bloom 1973) The poet, while creating her craft, employs some of these techniques to reach to her own creative goal. The more far removed the influence is, the stronger the misreading is considered to be, and the more original and distinctive the poet is considered. Through an exposition of Fanthorpe's famous ekphrastic poem 'Not My Best Side', the paper analyses the literary merit of Fanthorpe as a strong poet who struggled with her literary predecessors, focusing upon her Freudian struggle with her literary parents and employment of the defence mechanism- the revisionary ratios to find her own voice to establish the assertion.

An Ekphrastic Poem:

One of the most important of her poems, 'Not My Best Side', is from the first published volume *Side Effects* (1978). This is an ekphrastic poem based on the fifteenth century Italian Renaissance painter Paolo Uccello's painting 'St. George and the Dragon' (about 1470) placed in the National Gallery, London. The poem offers three dramatic or internal monologues from the perspective of a knight, St. George, a princess who was the supposed damsel-in-distress, and a villainous, bloodthirsty dragon. The painting featured some anomalies deviating from the traditional narrative of the 11th century French metrical romances, and the poem provides an ironic and an anti-romantic take on the prototypical man-woman-beast equation. The subversion of the myth inspires the poet to reconstruct a narrative that employs contemporary notions and urban diction. The art inspires the poet to confront issues of real life, negotiating desires, aesthetic pleasures and harsh realities. In the

triptych dramatic monologues, each character reveals an obsessive vanity and self-consciousness. To a literature student, Fanthorpe shall appear to be a prodigy of Robert Browning and her poem 'Not my Best Side' a great-grandchild of 'My Last Duchess' (1842). Browning's 'My Last Duchess' is not an ekphrastic poem per se, but is contextualised against the painted portrait of a deceased Duchess. Duke Ferrera, the speaker in the poem, points out to an envoy who has come to him with a marriage proposal the character traits of his deceased wife, the aforementioned Last Duchess. He meticulously points out to the messenger what the excesses were and what was amiss in his previous wife and how she deserved to have her 'smiles' stopped altogether by his (Duke's) command. The duke simultaneously reveals his own cruel character, and the conscientious reader would find faults with the duke and express pity as well as empathy with the dead Duchess.

Fanthorpe's *agon* with Browning:

'Not My Best Side' is Fanthorpe's *agon* or struggle with the 17th century Victorian poet Robert Browning and what Harold Bloom calls a swerve (*Clinamen*) and an anti-thesis (*Tessera*). Fanthorpe's poem is a strong misreading of Browning's 'My Last Duchess', as it seems to be engaging in a similar turf: the psychological machinations and expectations of interpersonal relationships. While Browning's poem confines itself to the man-woman game, Fanthorpe, owing to her modern situation, also brings in the third dimension. One may consider her an ecological egalitarian for giving a perspective and a voice to an animal; however, the dragon may alternatively be read as a symbol of unconventional choice or a fad of the modern urban culture; the animal may be read as a symbol of the odd dissenter or splinter that the good girls keep choosing for thrill and adventure.

Fanthorpe is an urban poet of the eighties and nineties who has television, dial phones, desk job, museums and parks, all of which shape and feature in her poetry. Her poetry has social concerns as its themes, but they also offer unusual perspectives and quirks of characters that are quintessential to the urban culture. Christina Patterson writes:

The voice throughout this first collection, *Side Effects* - and, indeed, all her work - is wry, laconic, clear-eyed and, above all, compassionate. The poems are like acts of witness and remembrance... (2003)

Fanthorpe questions art, religion, systems and faith without being emotional or confessional. Unlike many of her contemporaries or predecessors on either side of the Atlantic, she chose not to dwell upon her sexuality or her sexual orientation but relied on her concerns for the modern world to connect with her readers using ingenious wit and perspicuity. Interestingly, her wit carries startling wisdom driven home by brutal honesty or cogent expressions; it does not allow the readers any sense of comfort. The reader is, to draw an analogy, offered a plush ottoman but is never allowed to get cosy, relishing its plushness.

Triptych Monologues:

Titled 'Not My Best Side', the poem puts across the three monologues where the characters reflect upon their position and choices in tandem with each other; the poet's choice of the nomenclature hints that there are awareness and acceptance of the fallen standards of propriety and behaviour amongst the characters. Ursula Fanthorpe reveals herself to be ruthlessly captious but stays faithful to her craft. While Uccello's painting deviates from traditional parameters of beauty and bravery, the modern parameters of selecting a partner have also changed. Fanthorpe, instead of being merely critical of the initial artefact, moulds

the unconventional to represent the postmodern consumption and appearance-obsessed society. Her characters fall prey to outward appearances even when they are seemingly questioning it, illustrating the deep psychological insecurity that features with age. The contemporary world obsesses over exhibitional extravagance and fusses over physiology and power dynamics, which is given eloquence in the poem. The poet's objective seems to draw attention to the complex tussle between the need for the ethical and the desire for the immoral. She makes the fictional characters speak their primordial minds with honesty, unbothered by the subversion it may cause to the social order. However, the honesty is not to serve the higher cause of truth or peace but is rather a solipsistic utilitarian facility. Her character's honesty is not steadfastness, unlike those of the modern playwrights, Henrik Ibsen or GB Shaw's, they aren't meant to rectify the social order through their moral fortitude- they speak from the individualised postmodern standpoint that is prejudicially self-absorbed and capricious.

Dragon, Warrior, Princess:

Fanthorpe interestingly gives the first voice to the dragon, which exudes a fable-like ambience – 'Not my best side, I'm afraid' (Fanthorpe 1), establishing a pseudo-apologetic tone and an urban hyper consciousness for physical beauty – 'the artist didn't give me a chance to pose properly' (2-3). Small, clear sentences with the use of enjambments show the dragon's self-conscious awareness of his position in the tandem. He knows he can have his share of glory if supported by the system – 'Poor chap had his obsession with/ Triangles, so he left off two of my/ Feet.' (4-6) But since the system doesn't abet, he remains a subaltern whose voice doesn't count: 'What after all are two feet/ To a monster?' (7-8). The use of rhetoric by the dragon displays his desire to live in an illusion that his agency matters – 'I didn't comment at the time.' (6) The use of 'I' here betrays his authority. The dragon feels he could have done something that would have rippled into a systemic change but then he goes on to recount that his killer prince was unceremoniously boyish- 'ostentatiously beardless' (11), his prey an 'inedible woman' (14) who has him by a 'string' and his killing rather bloodless. No dramatic action, no cherished prize, no mighty warrior, no macabre fight. It was all insipidly ritualistic and unspectacular, which the dragon is at pains to project as the fault of the artist but fails to realise that his very assertiveness points to his weakness. The monstrosity- which is his forte-is to be proved through a show of blood, violence and gore which seems to be absent from the picture. Also, he is being held on a string by the princess – this too is beyond the romantic notions of the distressed damsel that needs rescue. However, the dragon claims 'Dying ritually since I always rise again' (16-7) – the acceptance of the norm brings about a confidence unshared by the other two and the readers are left wondering whether the dragon is more realistic than the humans. Harold Bloom in his book *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) discusses *Teressa* as one of the revisionary ratios that an ephebe (younger poet) chooses for completion and to introduce anti-thesis. A poet antithetically "completes" his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough." (14)

The second section of the poem has the female's voice – the Princess seems to be the sigma heroine who holds a dragon on leash except that she compromises for her safety and long-term stability in a traditional society. She is also said to be most unattractive; the Knight sings no hymns in her praise, but rather feels he's (the Knight) her best bet, and the Dragon calls her 'inedible', which is the bitterest line of the poem. The standards of beauty are very

unforgivingly British and are reinforced unapologetically. This section has only run-ons, with constant interjections that only underline the doubt that she begins her address with – ‘It’s hard for a girl to be sure if/ She wants to be rescued. I mean, I quite/ Took to the dragon.’ (Fanthorpe 20-22) She is split between the choices of traditional ‘saving’ by a man who isn’t handsome and has his own wobbly ground, and that of the dragon, who is an attractive but a highly unconventional choice. The attractiveness of the otherwise unattractive animal is a subversion of the standards of beauty as practised by society. But there is a strong sexual attraction suggested by the choice of her idioms; ‘sexy tail, ‘he was ready to eat me’, ‘you could see all his equipments/At a glance (35-6)’. The reader once again encounters the postmodern self-obsession and hyper sexuality as they are given a peek into her behaviour. In a dramatic twist, the girl weighs her options between the knight who has come to save her and the dragon whose ‘equipments’ could be seen’ at a glance.’ But the choice is not made out of fear of deviation from traditional norms rather by the practical wisdom of any human – the dragon gets beaten by the ‘boy’. (20-37)

The equation between the dragon that is massive, ferocious and bloodthirsty and the pretentious young man is toppled twice – the girl holds the dragon on a leash, and the man, who is not even old enough to be called so, his naïveté and youth not an asset for the girl, beats up the dragon. The picture shows little blood, and the dragon tamed depicts a clear and marked win of the human over the animals, no matter how bloodthirsty or ferocious it might look. The young woman’s concern regarding the appearance and appropriateness of the man under the ‘hardware’ is the cause of her mistrust. She doesn’t trust or need the sheen but is looking for a companion that can gratify her sexually. Interestingly, the moment captured in the painting may exude a feel of tradition, given the clothing and the taming of a dragon as the villain, but it has been transformed into a moment of an urban dating scenario. The man is right swiped for his gauged masculinity, even though the raw sexuality of the dragon was more appealing to the woman before.

Clinamen, for Harold Bloom, “appears as a corrective movement... which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves.” (Bloom, 14) This poem turns this larger-than-life event of the knight in shining armour saving the damsel in distress from the bloodthirsty beast into an existential crisis that pervades the urban youth of contemporary society. The bane of choices, the flooding of options, the desire for the unconventional, and the notion to follow one’s heart are all given a place. However, the final choice is made not based on bravery, moral courage or honesty but on calculated judgment- who has won! It’s a choice made not by a woman in love but by a survivor of the consumerist society- those who possess winning power are to be admired and chosen.

The last stanza spoken by the knight/boy makes a proclamation of his degrees and diplomas – Dragon Management, Virgin Reclamation, Automatic transmission, Obsolescence (Fanthorpe 38-42) – the use of capitalisations to exhibit his bravura is a replication of the contemporary structure of institutional skill sets necessary for job applications. He is forced to flaunt the certification of his skills – ‘diplomas in Dragon Management and Virgin Reclamation’ (38-9) – as he did not get much opportunity to display them; the dragon was held by a string by the young woman. There wasn’t any saving left to do. This irks the knight, who blames it on the girl- ‘you are endangering the job prospects’ (53), ‘you are in my way’ (56). The ostensible structuring and verbal passive

aggression present him as a boy nonetheless, which the young woman gauges correctly. Statements like 'You can't/ do better than me' (44-5), 'So why be difficult' (47), 'being choosy' (52), 'What, in any case, does it matter what/ you want?' (55-6) 'You're in my way' (56) – reveals him as a dyspeptic, unsure man who is trying to gaslight, tame and tune down a woman. The man does not like the fact that the woman is dismissive of his manhood and is rather impressed by the dragon.

While all three speakers have their own complexes that play out in a fictional universe, it is the poet's perspicuity that is striking. Ursula Fanthorpe is laying bare for her readers the hypersensitive internal conflicts that the modern world undergoes. While every man-woman and marginalised creature is trying to find a voice, make a choice, climb up a ladder, seemingly running a race, every single one has their own unique struggle. While *swerving* from the literary giants to subvert the poetic misprisions, the technical term for which in Bloom's terminology is *Clinamen* (Pg 14), Fanthorpe indulges in counter-sublimes, giving the dragon primacy in her narrative as well as in the eyes of her fictional princess, by deglamourising the valour of the warrior prince and the beauty and delicacy of her princess. Fanthorpe does not favour any of her creations; she only presents the world that they live in, which embroils them in a perpetual struggle between the ethical and the moral. The poet found an opportunity for her perspective in projecting this struggle on a medieval painting but the sentiments depicted are from the modern world of commerce and consumption. She looks at things as they are without the lens of social propriety or civilisational sophistication. Her eyes only witness the raw brutality of life that is stripped of all ornamentation; hence her language remains direct, and unpretentious. The poem also reveals a structural tussle between the aesthetic and the ethical values of modern life.

Fanthorpe as a Strong poet:

Marshalling Bloom's designation of a strong poet, Fanthorpe does not try to provide definitions or sensibility to the order of life itself. "Poetic Influence", Bloom remarks, "involves two strong, authentic poets, always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation." (Bloom 30) Fanthorpe *swerves* to create her own poetic voice and intentions by laying bare for her readers what she perceives as the crisis or the concern, using the lens of social propriety or civilisational sophistication to reveal the raw brutality of life that is stripped of all ornamentation.

Rachey Carney analyses 'Not My Best Side' as an ekphrastic poem and praises the poem's use of the "technique of ventriloquism (that) can prompt a sense of empathy with the figures depicted in a painting." She further remarks:

Fanthorpe's use of two particular ekphrastic tropes – ventriloquism, and the juxtaposition of two time periods – that contribute to this simultaneous collapsing and foregrounding of the distance between past and present. (Carney 2012)

Her language, hence, remains direct and unpretentious. Fanthorpe's content is quirky and whimsical but her voice is strongly rooted in the world she is a part of. She carries a light-heartedness, a suave and a sincerity which comes from her experience as a litterateur. Her sense of humour is not as macabre as that of Stevie Smith (1902-71), her language not as shockingly punctuated as Emily Dickinson (1830-86), and her irony is milder than Philip Larkin (1922-85), though her content is more mature and empathetic.

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